

Stuart Price, United Nations Photo



Aftermath of an attack on Abyei Town, South Sudan, in May 2011

Engendering Responses to Complex Emergencies

Lessons from South Sudan

BY AKINYI R. WALENDER

Like so many before it, the current crisis in South Sudan is a classic example of what humanitarians term a “complex emergency”—a major humanitarian crisis that was not caused by a single natural disaster, but by a combination of political and ethnic conflict, social inequality, poverty, and many other interrelated factors. As such, those looking to end the emergency and pave the way for long-term peace in South Sudan have a range of dynamics to consider, from the causes of the conflict and the protection of civilians to addressing basic humanitarian needs and building a foundation for a stable society. Yet, whether they are delivering security assistance or food aid, national and international organizations frequently overlook another dynamic that runs through all of these areas: the gender dynamic.

Over time, strategies such as gender mainstreaming have been devised with the aim of integrating gender issues into development programming; however, incorporating gender into humanitarian efforts and efforts aimed at resolving conflict are still challenged by a perception that one must choose between efficiency and gender sensitivity during crisis. Understandably, emphasis tends to be placed on addressing the immediate needs of affected communities, such as saving lives and providing water, food, and shelter, at the expense of addressing gender issues which are thought to require a concerted medium- to long-term vision. However, integrating a gender perspective into responses to complex emergencies from the outset can help security, humanitarian, and development organizations to better understand the nature of the crisis at hand and bolster the effectiveness of their response—for both women and men—in the affected communities.

But what do the gender dimensions of a complex emergency look like? And how can they be addressed? This article explores some concrete examples from South Sudan to shed light on what gender-sensitive approaches to restoring security could look like in South Sudan, and possibly in

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other protracted situations of humanitarian crisis and conflict, such as those in the Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Mali, to name but a few in Sub-Saharan Africa. In this article, I will draw on my own experience working with men and women in the midst of crises, as well as cases and insights documented by others. I offer examples that illustrate how a gender lens can be applied in analyzing the causes of a complex emergency, improving the protection of civilians and humanitarian responses, and supporting efforts to resolve conflict and restore security and stability.

A Gendered Lens on the Causes of Conflict

The people of South Sudan rejoiced when they gained their independence from Sudan in 2011. However, alongside ongoing tensions and conflicts with their newly separated neighbor to the north, numerous low-intensity tribal wars within South Sudan became more pronounced in the years that followed. These conflicts between and within cattle-owning pastoralist communities spilled over into neighboring agriculturalist communities and have left thousands of people dead and many more displaced. These tensions have, to a large extent, paralyzed the young nation.

Although political leaders have played a significant role in the most recent outbreak of war in South Sudan, inter-tribal conflicts frequently characterized by cattle raiding, unresolved political and tribal animosities, pillage of resources, and human rights abuses have also contributed to this and other complex emergencies in South Sudan in recent decades, which have frequently coincided with natural calamities such as floods, cattle diseases, drought, and major famine (in 1998 and

1999). While others will examine the role of elites and exclusive governance in the outbreak of war, the locus of recurring inter-tribal conflict at the community level also offers an illustrative example of gender dynamics that contribute to the root causes of conflict, but may not be immediately visible to international actors seeking to restore stability.

The majority of the population in South Sudan is pastoralist or agro-pastoralist, so for most people livelihoods are defined by keeping livestock and subsistence agriculture. For the country's largest ethnic groups, the Dinka and the Nuer, as well as for many others, cattle are prized as a source of livelihood as well as social status. The prevalence of male-dominated cattle raiding has been well documented in intra- and inter-tribal conflict in South Sudan, as well as the cycles of violence and revenge that accompany it. Poverty, inequality, and competition over access to grazing land and water contribute to this conflict dynamic, but gender identities also play a role. Pastoralist communities in South Sudan are generally polygynous and patriarchal. Men head the household and are expected to defend; women are perceived as caretakers of honor and community identity. In many communities, participation in violent cattle raiding and the cycles of revenge that follow are associated with perceptions of men's roles as defenders of the community and its honor. In addition, in South Sudan the "bride price" is paid by the prospective husband to the bride's family. This form of dowry is typically paid in cattle or in some combination of money and livestock. A variety of research has shown that increasing bride prices have been driving male youth to intensify cattle raids as a means of raising funds for marriage, which in turn is considered a significant step for social

advancement.¹ And women take pride in the number of cattle paid for them.

Beyond the particular example of cattle raiding, gender roles also come into play in broader conflict tactics and strategies. Rape and sexual violence have become very common in times of war as a means of subjugating enemy communities, and South Sudan is no exception. Women represent cultural identity; they are the pride of the communities, so raping women is a way to hit at the heart of a community's identity. When nomads fight farming communities, women and girls often become targets as a means of disrupting communities' coping mechanisms, such as harvesting crops and the collection and sale of wild fruits and other products, which are predominantly carried out by women. Nomads have

also used these practices to force communities away from the land they are seeking to use as they expand their access to scarce natural resources. In parallel, men's disproportionate exposure to combat—sometimes exacerbated by perceptions that a wife has been purchased as property—contributes to the elevated levels of domestic violence against women in South Sudan. Women and girls suffer most from rape, but there is an increasing stock of evidence that boys and young men are vulnerable to rape as well.

Communities' expectations of men and women, as well as conceptualizations of masculinity and femininity, therefore play a role in escalating violence in South Sudan, and logically need to be addressed in order to break conflict cycles. "Engendering" interventions,



Cattle auction, Lankien, South Sudan

therefore, requires taking both men and women into account. The specific challenge posed by bride prices and cattle raiding also demonstrates how gender sensitivity is derived from cultural knowledge and that any assessment of key players and power relations needs to be context-based. Locals have the best knowledge about their culture, values, and norms, so international actors need to engage locals to inform a thorough, gendered conflict analysis that will inform any programs or projects that follow.

Gender Analysis in the Protection of Civilians and Humanitarian Response

Crises cause instability, displacement, and disruption to peoples' normal ways of life. This has adverse and long-term effects on both women and men. In most cases, the indirect effects of humanitarian crises that lead to death, such as disease, starvation, and breakdown of social order, go unrecognized and unreported—and these affect women disproportionately.² As such, gender analysis can also strengthen humanitarian response and help international security actors to better protect civilians in times of crisis.

The nexus of food security, gender, and violence is illustrative in this respect. For predominantly pastoralist and agriculturalist populations, recurring crises and displacement in South Sudan have caused major disruptions to livelihoods and farming, leading to significant food shortages, which various humanitarian organizations have sought to address. Household food security in South Sudan relies predominantly on subsistence production, including activities related to keeping cattle, fishing, growing cereal crops, and collecting wild fruits. Both men and women cultivate the land; men dig while women weed and harvest

the crops. In some communities there are equal rights to land for both men and women, despite the common assumption that women generally do not have rights to land. Where fish is the main source of food, fishing is the role of men; on the other hand, in the same communities women are responsible for the collection of wild fruits. Women also collect firewood and water, and as a result they bear the largest burden in food production.

From this, we can conclude that the gender roles ascribed to women in ensuring food production and generally maintaining households' food security create levels of vulnerability that are different from men in times of crisis. Women are required to travel outside their homes, trade, look for food, gather firewood and wild fruits, fetch water, as well as weed and harvest. These daily chores expose women to risks of violence and rape, which are often perpetrated strategically by the conflict parties, as noted above. However, rampant sexual abuse and exploitation of women can also come from external sources: during the previous conflict in South Sudan, aid workers were accused of soliciting sex from women in return for food and of impregnating local girls. Children born out of these liaisons were sometimes named after the respective organizations that employed these male aid workers. Beyond these human threats, women and the children who accompany them to collect water, food, or firewood also face the ever-present risk of anti-personnel mines. These mines were planted around water points and fields in South Sudan. Many women, girls, and boys have become victims of mines and lost their limbs or lives.

Despite the challenges, I repeatedly witnessed the strength and tenacity of women contributing to the humanitarian response in

what is now South Sudan. I remember meeting a group of women in Tonj County in 1998, at the height of the famine that left over 100,000 people dead. Long before the humanitarian community arrived, a group of women organized themselves to form “TAWA” (Tanj Areas Women’s Association) and set up a feeding center. These women mobilized their own resources to buy cows. They then slaughtered the cows, boiled the meat, and fed the famished people. They kept the people alive before the humanitarian community arrived.

Women’s disproportionate roles in food production, as well as their particular exposure to insecurity in the process, shows why it is not enough to target women exclusively as beneficiaries of humanitarian and security assistance—whether this relates to food aid, demining, or the protection of civilians. Women need to be involved in the planning stage of these activities, given their access to different kinds of information, as well as in implementation, given their frequently distinct skill sets. At the same time, security forces, peacekeepers, law enforcement personnel, and humanitarian agencies need to improve staff training on gender perspectives and better link their mandates to gender-sensitive interventions, at the very minimum ensuring that sexual abuse and exploitation are not tolerated under any circumstances.

Inclusive Conflict Resolution

Given the diverse impacts of complex emergencies on women and men, and the various roles that they play, how can we ensure that women have space to contribute to altering the course of crises in their communities? Despite all the evidence, the voices of women remain significantly under-represented from emergency response to peace processes to

development planning. It is in decisionmaking arenas that voice and influence matter the most. Where are the women?

South Sudan and Sudan present a great example of women mobilizing themselves across the warring borders to play an instrumental role in catalyzing the events that led up to the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in 2005. The women I met yearned for peace and fought for it, because for many, their lives had been characterized by multiple tragedies of death, hunger, war, and crisis; they were simply tired of living a life that held no promise for their sons’, daughters’, or their own futures; they simply became tired of watching their dreams trampled on over and over again. Their persistent advocacy for ending the conflict and tenacity in forging cross-border relations and putting pressure on their governments to end the war made them instrumental for peace. In a similar way, they were vital for the people-to-people peace process within South Sudan in the decade that followed.

Despite these contributions, women remained largely on the periphery of the negotiations leading to the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement and the more recent peace negotiations to end the crisis within South Sudan, which took place in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. In the former, they managed to secure an affirmative action clause of a minimum 25 percent representation for women at all levels of peace negotiations, but the implementation of this has been challenging.

Of course, women do not always mobilize for peace. In South Sudan, a small number of women carried arms; others fed, nourished, and sustained the soldiers. In Sudan’s Darfur region, where communities have not only waged war against other communities, but also

against the oppression of the Sudanese government, the powerful female poets known as *hakamat* have played a role in motivating their men to fight. They say that the *hakamat* can put a man down or raise him up. When they target a man in public negatively or positively, they shape public opinion, and their skill is a source of power and income.³ They have likely fueled conflict by massaging men's egos and taunting them through song and poetry, challenging their manhood; and to prove their manhood, men charge into war. However, many *hakamat* are now choosing to chant for peace, calling on men to "put the gun down."⁴

Regardless of the roles they choose to play, women are not passive in conflict. This common assumption cannot be further from the truth. Women are motivated by the same passions that drive and motivate men. They are

involved in the issues that impact their lives and societies so dramatically—whether political, economic, or religious. They cannot be perceived solely as innocent bystanders because they have a big stake as members of their communities. In many African communities, a woman's visibility in the public sphere does not correlate with the power she wields behind the scenes, in her household or community. The example of the *hakamat* shows that women often have strong influence and play significant roles in shaping decisions made by men. The lesson is to involve women in the solution. As the *hakamat* have shown, the same medium used to incite violence—song and poetry—can also be powerful tools for changing public opinion and forging peace.

To overcome the institutionalized and deliberate exclusion of women from public



Albert Gonzalez, UN Photo

Women in line at polling center in Nyala, South Darfur, on the first day of voting in South Sudan's referendum on independence in January 2011.

affairs, many women and civil society organizations are fighting for their place. Yet, it often happens that when women make it to the public sphere, they have been selected because they are women who cannot rise, confront, or challenge the issues on the negotiation table, or they are included without due consideration for caliber, knowledge, and capacity to represent the constituencies and issues relevant to their communities. For meaningful inclusion, women themselves should have a say in who represents them in the public sphere, and those women in decisionmaking positions should be mentored and supported to better represent their diverse constituencies, not least the female constituency.

Conclusion

The example of South Sudan shows the importance of applying a gender lens to all phases of complex emergencies, as well as the all-too-frequent failure to do so. Yet, all is not lost. Over time, the gender dimensions of complex emergencies have become a lot more evident and recognition of the importance of a gender perspective and an inclusive approach has grown. There is now a growing consensus that women can play an important role before, during, and after conflict and crisis. This is now captured by many players who are advocating for engendering peace and conflict resolution processes, as well as humanitarian response.

However, there is still a lot to be done to educate national and international actors in these environments. Part of this education involves an approach that remains continually adaptive to the changing context at hand. Just as conflicts and humanitarian crises place great stress on the socioeconomic capacities of communities, they frequently lead to the disintegration of social networks, and women's and

men's statuses and roles become destabilized. During emergency situations, social barriers break down, the normally accepted gender practices and attitudes of different communities frequently change over time—for example, due to displacement in South Sudan, women have taken on responsibilities for cattle and fishing, while men too have taken on food production activities. As the stress mounts, women sometimes become more conservative and withdrawn, overburdened by the increased societal expectations and responsibilities placed upon them because of crises. Women are usually expected to care for the injured and the sick, as well as for the children and the elderly. They often have to risk their lives to go out in search of food and water to fend for their families. They are vulnerable to assault and rape along the way. Very often they pick up the pieces, gather their strength, and continue to carry out their expected responsibilities. Very often there is no protection mechanism, legal or otherwise, in place to protect women during emergencies. On the contrary, those responsible for assisting them may inadvertently exacerbate their situation or even intentionally exploit them further.

The gender issues I have outlined here are not exhaustive, but they are among those that frequently come up during conflict and emergency situations. They clearly illustrate the need for gender analysis and the inclusion of women along the entire continuum of assistance provided during complex emergencies. A concerted effort to address the challenges and opportunities that gender dynamics raise in the midst of crisis can also provide a foundation for more inclusive and sustainable approaches to tackling the root causes of conflict, poverty, and instability in our societies over the long-term. When men and women

have equal opportunities to fulfill their potential and contribute to the growth of their countries, then we will begin to see real gains made all around. **PRISM**

Notes

¹ Marc Sommers and Stephanie Schwartz, "Dowry and division: youth and state building in South Sudan," United States Institute of Peace (November 2011); Saferworld, "People's peacemaking perspectives in South Sudan" (March 2012); Ingrid Kircher, "Challenges to security, livelihoods and gender justice in South Sudan," Oxfam (March 2013).

² Thomas Pluemper and Eric Neumeyer, "The Unequal Burden of War: The Effect of Armed Conflict on the Gender Gap in Live Expectancy," *International Organisation* 60, no. 3 (2006); Nicholas Kristof, "Starvation as a Product of War," *New York Times*, July 23, 2015.

³ "Hakamat" is the plural of "hakama."

⁴ UNDP, "Hakamas Promote Peace-building in Darfur," February 8, 2012. <http://www.sd.undp.org/content/sudan/en/home/ourwork/crisispreventionand-recovery/successstories/hakamas_peace_building.html>. See also UNDP, "Fighting for Peace: Hakamas in Darfur," <http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/ourwork/crisispreventionand-recovery/projects_initiatives/fighting-for-peace--hakamas-in-darfur.html>.

Photos

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